MEDIA EFFECTS ON THE POLITICAL PROCESS

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INTRODUCTION

It is a commonly held tenet that the media influences public opinion and public policy. There is an abundance of literature in which social scientists have presented their evidence for the effects of mass communication on the individual. Political scientists have offered a variety of models and hypotheses for the study of the media and politics. As evidenced by the various commissions of inquiry struck to investigate the state of the press, concern for the media's role within society in general and its effect on politics in particular has increased in the last several decades. Politicians themselves alternately fear and play to the media, at times being highly critical and defensive, as exemplified following the 1989 Alberta provincial election by cabinet minister Ernie Isley's claim of an Edmonton media vendetta against Premier Don Getty, at others attempting to utilize the media to their own persuasive ends. The public at large has come to rely on the news media for practically all their information regarding the politicians, policy-makers, and public policies that affect them.

Despite the belief that the media influences public policy, the participants in the Canadian political process which are accounted for in one way or another by the available literature, do not, as a rule, deal with the media from its own perspective. What do the members of the media consider to be their part in the political process? How do journalists, commentators, editors, and news directors, perceive their roles and responsibilities in the policy-making process? The purpose of this study is to address these questions by attempting to determine what members of the media themselves perceive to be their role in the political process.

BACKGROUND

The existing literature suggests the possible roles played by the media in the political process. Denis Stairs in The Press and Foreign Policy in Canada argues that the media is a political actor in the sense that it selectively supplies information which, while not affecting the substance of policy, places pressures and constraints on the activities of policy-makers. In The Newspaper and Public Affairs, Frederick Fletcher states that "news coverage often has direct influence on politicians and public servants either as a source of ideas, or more commonly as an indicator of public opinion" (1981:17). He quotes government officials as recognizing that the media can place an issue on a government agenda or give it higher priority by stimulating public reaction. As the public gets most of its information about politics from the media it follows that the public's priorities and attitudes on public policy issues are affected by that media. "The reality of politics in Canada for virtually all Canadians is the reality that is shaped, defined, and delivered by the mass media" (Young 1982:693). Society increasingly sees the media as the representative and protector of the people:

> In liberal democracies like Canada, the media are seen by many as a fourth branch of government, meeting the needs of the citizen by presenting the information necessary for effective political participation and by providing a forum for debate on public issues. In this process, they are expected to help governments disseminate vital information about public services - and government accomplishments - while providing opportunities for opposition parties to criticize the government and propose alternative policies...An important tradition in the Anglo-American democracies holds that the news media should serve as watchdogs, sniffing out abuses of power - especially by governments - and barking out the alarm (Fletcher and Taras 1981:194-5).

This idea of the media as the guardian of the public's interests is magnified by a recent trend toward negativism in political reporting. When a government

enjoys a majority such as now exists in Parliament, the press takes on the role of official opposition (Bain 1987).

Much research has been done on the media's role in elections which attempts to tie media coverage to actual votes. Strouse (1985) and others postulate that the media has more affect on changing voter attitudes between elections when voter interest and direct involvement in the political forum are at a lower level. Research indicates that the attitudes of committed voters with strong political views are not changed by efforts in political persuasion but that in recent years the numbers of the committed are in decline (Dick). Wagenburg et al, in "Media Agenda-Setting in the 1979 Federal Election" argue that the media's ability to mentally order and organize our world may be the most important effect of mass communication. Media salience during elections is operational in two ways - frequency of mention and placement of items.

Many of the potential means of media influence discussed by these authors bear close relationship to the agenda-setting hypothesis proposed by Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw in their study "The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media":

> While the mass media may have little influence on the direction and intensity of attitudes, it is hypothesized that the mass media set the agenda for each political campaign, influencing the salience of attitudes toward the political issues" (McCombs and Shaw 1972:177).

McCombs and Shaw interviewed voters in the 1968 presidential campaign to identify what these voters perceived to be the key issues and compared their findings with the content of the mass media serving the voters. They found a high correlation between issues emphasized in the media and those the surveyed

voters considered important. This correlation was taken as evidence of the media's power to influence the salience of issues in setting the public agenda.

The importance of the agenda-setting function has been noted by various authors. Arthur Siegal argues that as the priorities of the media become public priorities, agenda-setting is of critical importance in the analysis of the political process (1983). Walter Young postulates that so-called "objective news" is actually a highly selective interpretation of events which structure our world for us, setting the agenda within which we discuss the terms of our lives (1981). As the public gets most of its information about politics from the mass media, it follows that their priorities and attitudes on public policy issues are affected by that media:

> The reality of politics in Canada for virtually all Canadians is the reality that is shaped, defined, and delivered by the mass media...The media may not tell people what to think - at least that question remains in the air - but they do tell people what to think about (Young 1981:693).

In The Newspaper and Public Affairs, Frederick Fletcher states that "news coverage often has direct influence on politicians and public servants either as a source of ideas, or more commonly as an indicator of public opinion" (1981:17). Fletcher also suggests that media impact on the public results in indirect influence on policy-making. He quotes government officials as recognizing that the media can place an issue on a government agenda or give it higher priority by stimulating public reaction. Citing earlier research, Fletcher finds a relationship between newspaper headlines and public perceptions of the country's major political problems. Other authors support

this observation

> By presenting the Canadian community with a relatively common agenda of the problems facing them, the media reinforce the reality of a political entity known as Canada...that there is some common agreement on what it is that needs solving helps to confirm the Canadian political experience (Soderlund et al. 1984:142-3).

While much of the literature attempts to explain how the media in general fits into the overall political process, several authors postulate theories which begin to focus more directly on the subject of this study. In Mass Communications in Canada, Lorimer and McNulty suggest that the output of a particular medium is greatly affected by the way the professionals play their specific roles in the production and processing of media content (1987:60). Comber and Mayne in The Newsmongers state that the image of political reality presented by the media is the only image most of society has of the political process. "It is media organizations and those who work for them who select, package, and ultimately create these images. How well they do their jobs affects us all" (1987:167).

In discussing the self-perceptions of the members of the media, Comber and Mayne suggest that danger lies in the fact that "many journalists refuse to accept the argument that the media has an important influence on the political process. They insist that the so-called power of the press is wildly exaggerated" (ibid). Finally, it has been suggested that Canadians have "a right to expect the media to dedicate themselves to a greater degree of insight into their own roles and a more professional committment to fulfilling their responsibilities (Soderlund, et al. 1984:143)

METHODOLOGY

The data I wished to collect consisted of perceptions and attitudes rather than specific factual information, therefore the selected research instrument was the informal interview with a structured questionnaire used as a guide. This method, which enabled the introduction of questions within the context of discussion allowed the interviewees to provide more detailed answers and resulted in the respondents raising and elucidating pertinent issues not overtly suggested by the structured questions.

The sample of individual journalists interviewed for this study included reporters and commentators who gather and report political information and editors and news directors who act as gatekeepers in deciding which issues are reported and in determining level of coverage. These groups are the representatives of the media most closely associated with the media content which is believed to influence the political process. The following sections present categorically the results of these interviews.

MEDIA ROLES

The media's role is to supply good public information by identifying and presenting issues objectively. Strictly speaking, the media's role is neither to shape nor promote public policy, but to identify central issues and stimulate public debate by presenting all sides of each issue. The individuals interviewed generally felt that all aspects of society should be fairly represented and that the media should reflect public opinion, not lead it. This is not to say that the media is or should be merely reactionary.

While the media may reflect public opinion, it must also take the initiative in bringing issues forward to society. Journalists have a duty to find out what groups within society are affected by particular issues and to get the reactions of lobby groups and other interested parties. One respondent from a tabloid suggested, however, that journalists have an idea of "what should be," and because of this may actually lead public opinion.

With regard to government, the media's role is to scrutinize each policy, gauging public reaction and the motives of the government, and measuring it against past government policies. An extremely important part of what the media does relates to its public watchdog role: "A journalist must never assume that he/she is getting the full story. A good political reporter will wonder exactly what the political agenda is, attempt to put it into context and look beyond the surface. Politicians do manage news. It's their job to." One respondent used the euphemism 'Ministry of Truth' in reference to government efforts at news management and offered as an example the government's tendency to place everything in the best light possible. There seems to be a consensus among respondents and within the literature that news management attempts of the government and the cynicism of the media have resulted in the establishment of a tacitly understood relationship. Journlaists "have to know the rules of the game as politicians play it well." The experience and background knowledge of the reporter is very important here. "There are perennial issues reporters know about, issues which are the same in significant aspects." The reporter may be able to sense the soft spots in a policy statement but although he/she is always looking, the soft spots may not be recognized. It was suggested that government will occasionally respond to media coverage by "shooting the messenger," indicating

that a soft spot has been uncovered. One example given involved Premier Getty calling members of the press gallery "goofy" in response to questions concerning the total cost of election spending promises. The figures being used in the context of the questions were in effect confirmed by Treasurer Dick Johnston several days later. It is possible that this criticism of the media is an attempt to direct attention away from a weak policy. One respondent believes that a real problem exists in that the media may be afraid to take on government in case it "ends up looking the fool."

A recurrent theme in the literature is the belief that the media has taken on the role of the unofficial opposition. While reference was made to the strong need for a watchdog in the face of an overwhelming majority government and also to a declaration by a former publisher of The Edmonton Journal to the effect that his newspaper would indeed be the opposition, all of the respondents, to varying degrees, felt that this was not their role. The job of the journalist is simply to get stories and if a story critical of government is good then the journalist goes with it. The responsible journalist does not "slam the government for no reason." An editor commented that stories in which an overtly negative focus is apparent are usually short on detail and are clearly slanted. "Those which go for the jugular are normally fuzzy stories and are recognized as pointed." Several respondents with press gallery experience commented that politicians are publicly accountable and are therefore fair game. It was further suggested that lower civil servants were perhaps given more of a chance. The point was made that while members of the press gallery develop relationships with politicians and civil servants in the course of their duties, there can be little room for sentiment. An example was given of the way in which relationships change when

politicians and media members are just doing their jobs. When Premier Don Getty first came to office he attempted to develop good relations with the media. He was good-natured toward and freely accessible to members of the press gallery. Over time, however, due perhaps to his negative perception of the media's reporting of his government's activities, Premier Getty changed his attitude. Journalists who formerly could speak with the Premier directly found they must deal exclusively with his press secretary. In the wake of Ernie Isley's "vendetta" accusation following the provincial election, the co-chairman of the Premier's Stettler by-election campaign went as far as creating a virtual media blackout with regard to Mr. Getty's itinerary and availability. The local press was allowed access but the press gallery, those who are responsible for reporting the majority of Alberta's political news, were refused similar access. This situation lasted for the first two weeks of the campaign.

OBJECTIVITY/INTERPRETATION

There was a consensus among the respondents that objectivity was the goal and the responsibility of every journalist. The role of the media is to identify or uncover issues and to try hard to be objective and fair in reporting them. Reporting the facts however, does not entail being a passive conduit of information from the various sources. Journalists, it was said, "are not stenographers or scribes" and it is not their job to report verbatim. They focus on meaning and must, therefore, interpret and analyze information to ensure that the audience understands the issues. "Fairness" was considered a more useful term than "objectivity" and it was suggested that research and experience on the part of the journalist contributes to fairness

in analysis. A conduit function for the media does exist as information is passed between segments of society.

In striving for fairness, the organizations represented in this study had either formal or informal rules with regard to political party membership or the "showing of political stripes in the newsroom." These journalists are aware however that subjectivity does exist, and while each individual may have personal opinions with regard to certain issues, each must "step back from personal biasses" in the performance of the job. One respondent suggested that bias was natural due to the human element involved. It was also proposed that the stance of a particular media outlet may influence the way in which a story is pursued. For example, The Toronto Star's negative view of the proposed free trade agreement had resulted in reporters from that newspaper asking negotiator Simon Reisman "harder questions" than those asked by journalists from other outlets. Any attempt on the part of the journalist to sway the audience to one point of view or another is frowned upon. Most respondents were very aware of the political impact of stories. It was the opinion of one respondent that in drawing attention to an issue perhaps the news item would identify with a particular side but that the media's role is not to promote one side over another. The potential for this to occur is increased when the journalist meets resistance or receives disinformation from a source.

The media has been accused of negativism in its public affairs coverage, both in the literature and by politicians, (in early 1988 by Premier Getty with regard to coverage of the Principal Group affair, and by Mr. Isley following the 1989 election). The journalists would argue that coverage of

issues which deviate from the expected norm could be interpreted as negativism but that this is simply part of the job. "If you have someone dead to rights, then the story is legitimate." It was also mentioned that the public is fascinated by a fallen idol, which gives the expose prominence. As for anticipating the effect of a story, editors interviewed displayed slightly divergent viewpoints. On one hand it is possible that some editors "have the stories written and just need the quotations." It was also suggested that reporters may "dress up issues for effect by using lots of background." This statement was qualified by the fact that if editors conceptualize too much they won't get everything to fit. On the other hand, it was argued that editors and reporters must have an open mind. They start with an idea and if the story doesn't work it is dropped.

ISSUE SELECTION

The process of deciding which policy issues to give attention to is a complex one, as each story has a set of intrinsic characteristics ranging from audience interest, controversiality, and special twists, etc., and is affected by external factors such as available space/air time, type of media and mandate of the organization. Referring to the complexity of the selection process, the suggestion was made that an editor develops "news judgment" and that the selection process becomes instinctive. It was agreed that at the very least the story must be of interest to some segment of society or there will be no coverage. The media does not originate issues. Through continued attention, the media will maintain the high profile of an issue if it is in the public interest or they might raise the profile of an issue of concern to the community. This seems to allude to the media's agenda-setting function.

"media agenda" was also referred to. It is difficult for media outlets to set their own agenda. Much attention is paid to what other outlets are carrying. If one outlet fails to carry a story which others are carrying, then editors/news directors will wonder why. So-called "pack journalism" and competition for stories creates a kind of momentum which lends added legitimacy to a story. A respondent from the electronic media suggested that "scalping" (the theft of stories from other outlets which are then rewritten and presented as original) is commonplace. Another respondent felt that when one outlet broke a story, others would downplay it, placing the onus on the first outlet to maintain the momentum. While in selection and ranking, an outlet will tend to go with the strongest story, the mandate of the outlet in terms of political geography, may dictate the inclusion or exclusion of certain items. An outlet with a provincial or national mandate might exclude local fires, for example, as in all likelihood, the majority of the audience would not be interested or affected. Sources are obviously important in selecting and developing a story. It is generally recognized that reporters are dealing with self-interested sources and that information could be "structured to steer in one direction and away from another." The respondents agreed upon the importance of covering issues from all angles and via a multiplicity of sources. Experience can also contribute here.

IMPACT ON POLICY

The media identifies and presents issues requiring political action. The media supplies politicians with policy cues through the information presented and the questions posed. By giving an issue prominence the media can place that issue on the public and internal political agendas. The media may also

pressure government to remove an item from the political agenda. An example given involved a proposed elimination of certain items from the Alberta Health Care Plan. The persistence of the media in maintaining the issue's high profile resulted in the removal of the policy from the governmental agenda. Another incident was discussed by several respondents as an example of how an individual journalist attempted to create an issue. During a televised interview with Liberal Party leader John Turner, the interviewer alluded to rumours that Turner had a drinking problem. Comments referring to the incident reflected the opinion that this type of journalism was shoddy. It was not a real issue and no sources were identified other than rumour. It was further suggested that a politician's personal life must be directly related to his/her public duties before it becomes a national issue.

While some respondents clearly believed in the potential for the media to affect public policy, others were more cautious in their opinions. With regard to the media's agenda-setting function, one respondent commented that agenda-setting was a loaded term which attributed more power to the media than it actually has. "We supply the information, others set the agenda." Another respondent hesitated to credit the media with adding or removing issues from the political agenda. It was argued that there must be an interested party in society which gets on the bandwagon. Perhaps it is not the pressure of the press but pressure applied by the interested group or segment of society which serves the agenda-setting function. A Lubicon land lease issue was used to exemplify the above statement in that "if the Lubicans roll over and die, the lumber contract becomes a dead issue" regardless of media attention.

DISCUSSION

A number of attitudes and perceptions expressed by those members of the media interviewed are shared by journalists interviewed in an initial study conducted in the spring of 1988. Bearing in mind the scope of the research, certain genralizations can be made. It is not the role of the media to shape the way the public views an issue, but simply to supply the facts and allow the public to make its own decisions. By providing information, the media helps the public to make informed decisions on the basis of fact. The media's role is also to reflect public opinion, but not lead it. An interpretation and analysis function has been assumed by the media to assist the public in understanding increasingly complex issues. Media generated opinion, however, should be the exclusive domain of opinion/editorial writers. In this instance, columnists and editorial writers may shape public policy by challenging the audience to recognize that something is wrong, and bringing about change. It is also generally felt that while a journalist must strive for objectivity or fairness, human nature occasionally intervenes, resulting in some bias.

With regard to issue selection, the strength of the story is the main determining factor. Other variables do exist however, including audience interest, potential impact, media type, outlet mandate, and availability of space. Space and air time are valuable commodities and therefore each story must be measured in this regard. Environmental variables such as media-type and economics are also factors which allow certian outlets to affect public policy to a greater extent. It is generally agreed that commercial radio has the least impact, television the greatest, with newspapers somewhere in

between. The prominence of an outlet, or the perception the public has about an outlet may also be determining factors.

News management attempts by sources (particularly government) are recognized as a fact of life, increasing the importance of questioning information received. Training and experience are important here. Political reporters are generalists armed with good basic information and common sense. Their job is to listen, understand, and question. It is conceded, however, that as generalists, the potential exists for missing things. Media professionals respect good journalistic training and the pursuit of certian ethics and ideals but add that in practice constraints are present which prevent the achievement of the lofty goals espoused by their critics.

The available literature suggests that the media influence politics, public policy and public opinion in a variety of ways and to a considerable degree. In investigating the role perceptions of individual journalists, the responses of those interviewed varied in degree from recognition of limited influence to belief in substantial influence. Most were aware of potential influence but stopped short of suggesting that the media alone has tremendous power or effect. Political actors within society are the key ingredients in the political process. The media can make issues more public, but they do not generate these issues.

The attitudes and perceptions of those involved in processing information vital to the democratic process undoubtedly affect the way in which they carry out their roles and will contribute to the direction in which the journalistic profession develops in the future.

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